Spotlight on Ethiopian Art

Posted: 16 Nov 2020

Membership

We speak to Rakeb Sile, Co-Founder of Addis Fine Art about the enduring modernist influence on artists practicing in Ethiopia.

Over the last decade Ethiopian artists have become more widely recognised by the global art market. Despite being historically overlooked, the country has a thriving art market – especially in the capital, Addis Ababa. Still, those working within the Ethiopian art market would be the first to admit that it hasn't always been that way.

"When we launched, there was a distinct lack of Ethiopian art spaces – especially ones which actively engage with the wider international contemporary art world," says Rakeb Sile, who co-founded the capital's Addis Fine Art gallery alongside Mesai Haileleul in 2016. "After three years of art consulting, we decided to open a gallery emerging from a local space in the heart of Ethiopia's capital."

The idea behind Addis was simple – to provide a platform for contemporary artists from Ethiopia and its diasporas. Now in their fourth year and working across both Addis Ababa and London, the pioneering gallery is an important voice not only in Ethiopian art but in art from the wider region, as well as the Ethiopian diaspora worldwide.

"I consider Addis Fine Art to be a regional specialist, where collectors can explore the diverse artistic practices from Ethiopia, and eventually the wider Horn of Africa region, in depth," Rakeb explains. There's no-one better to shed some light on Ethiopian art from a collector perspective – including everything from its historical groundings to the modernist-influenced practices which set the region's art apart right now.

Rakeb Sile, Co-Founder of Addis Fine Art. Photography by Bandele Zuberi.

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> *Co-Founder, Addis Fine Art*

The Geography

If you were drawing an artistic map of Ethiopia, all roads would lead to the formidable Alié School of Fine Arts and Design at Addis Ababa University. "It's the engine behind many of the artists coming out of the country," says Rakeb. "The school continues to deliver world class artists, most of whom are now being discovered both locally and abroad."

While the school has been a major driving force in the success of many contemporary Ethiopian artists, institutions such as Addis are also contributing to a thriving visual arts scene in the country's capital. "Despite Ethiopia having been historically sidelined, it has now really begun to find its voice," Rakeb says. "And recent interest in the visual arts has brought more collectors and art enthusiasts to the scene."

An influx of collectors has created a self-fulfilling prophecy – with more art interest comes more artists. Likewise, the growing success of Ethiopian artists abroad only takes the country's own scene from strength to strength. "Artists are emerging from the local scene and making a name for themselves internationally," Rakeb explains. "Then, the reverberations from their successes motivate the local scene."

The History

"Ethiopia has a long and rich history moulded by the many religious beliefs found in the country," Rakeb says. "All of which have all played an important role in our society and culture." This abundance of beliefs has led to an eclectic art history, usually focused around the art found in religious texts or religious buildings.

"Historically, paintings were used to decorate places of worship with beautiful frescos and iconography," Rakeb explains. "Drawing, paintings and calligraphy were expertly used in Christian Orthodox manuscripts." According to Rakeb, the Ethiopian "medium of choice" has therefore always been painting.

As Ethiopian art developed, a modernist movement began in the country – yet there wasn't always the gallery and collector infrastructure to publicise it. "Artists from Ethiopia's modernist era have been traditionally overlooked, and their importance to the nation's art history has gone largely uncelebrated," Rakeb says.

*Addis Fine Art's latest exhibition, **Tadesse Mesfin, Pillars of Life**, is on view at Cromwell Place from 3-13 December. Photography from Lucy Emms.*

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Some Names to Know

Rakeb cites Tadesse Mesfin as a key artist who embodies Addis Fine Art's mission of uplifting important, unrepresented Ethiopian modernist voices. "Not only is he one of the figureheads of the Ethiopian modernist movement, but he's also a long-time educator at the Alle School," she says. "As a result, he has taught and influenced over half of our roster of artists."

Mesfin's influence looms large over contemporary Ethiopian art – as does the influence of other modernist artists like Lulseged Retta, whom Addis also works with. Both studied painting in the former USSR before returning to Ethiopia to perfect their own distinct styles.

*Tesfaye Urgessa, **No Country for Young Men IX**, (2019)*

Tariku Shiferaw, Afro Blue (Erykah Badu), (2019)

Merikokeb Berhanu, Untitled Li, (2020)

The modernist influence remains, and painting is still the medium of choice for many contemporary Ethiopian artists. Key names to look out for include artists like Addis Gezehagn, Merikokeb Berhanu, Tesfaye Urgessa, Ermias Kifleyesus and Tizta Berhanu, all of whom trained at the Alle School – and all of whom are represented by Addis.

Addis also represents artists from Ethiopia's artistic diaspora. This includes Ethiopian-Americans like Tariku Shiferaw and Tsedaye Makonnen, Israel-based Nirit Takele, Adiskidan Ambaye in Frankfurt and Daniela Yohannes in the gallery's second home of London. Their work, often multi-disciplinary, tends to differ in content and style from their Ethiopia-based, non-diasporic counterparts.

"All have spent the majority, if not all, of their lives outside of Ethiopia in different parts of the world," Rakeb says."Their diverse perspectives often deal with topics of identity, multiculturalism, migration and race, referencing their cultural roots."

Addis Fine Art present *Tadesse Mesfin, Pillars of Life* at Cromwell Place from 3 - 13 December. Book your free admission here.

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